

# Food Security and Health

POSITION STATEMENT Oklahoma  
Health Equity Campaign

*"You've got to go out on a limb sometimes because that's where the fruit is."  
~Will Rogers*

## ***A community is food secure when...***

- There are adequate resources (such as grocery stores or farmers markets) from which people can purchase foods.
- Available resources are accessible to all community members.
- Food available in the community is sufficient in quality, quantity and variety.
- There are adequate food assistance programs to help low income people purchase and prepare nutritious foods.
- Locally produced food is available to community members.
- There is support for local food production.
- Every household is food secure within the community.<sup>1</sup>

## **Oklahoma Ranks Very High, for having Very Low Food Security**

Over half a million Oklahomans live in households that are food insecure. And nearly a quarter million live in households with "very low food security," meaning their eating patterns were disrupted and food intake was reduced because they couldn't afford enough food.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, the numbers of Oklahomans signing up for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) reached an all time in 2009, with 1 out of 7 adults, and 1 out of 4 children participating.<sup>3</sup>

Oklahomans also face a number of diet-related chronic health problems such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes. In fact, according to the United Health Foundation, Oklahoma ranks 43rd among all states for our overall health. And we come last in line for our fruit and vegetable consumption.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the many related contributing factors include:

- low median income and high poverty experienced by many Oklahomans;
- a high density of fast food establishments and convenient stores in many communities;
- low access to nutritious foods and lack of skills in selecting and preparing them;
- some of the least expensive foods are also the least nutritious; while most healthy foods cost more than junk food, in terms of calories provided, they are actually less expensive in terms of nutrients provided.<sup>5</sup>

Another factor affecting our access to good food can be found in 32 of Oklahoma's 77 counties -- those classified as "food deserts," meaning that at least 25 percent of the population lives ten miles or more from a supermarket or supercenter. Nine of those counties are "severe food deserts," meaning that the entire population has limited access to such food

outlets – a real problem when transportation is limited. All of Oklahoma’s food desert counties are rural, and yet food deserts also occur within our cities, such as in west and north Tulsa and parts of northeast OKC, where grocery stores are very limited and instead are convenient stores and liquor shops.<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, Oklahoma has a number of dedicated and resourceful individuals, organizations and agencies working to make lemonade from some of these lemon-like predicaments. Efforts to increase the presence of healthy corner stores, and farmers markets beginning to accept SNAP, WIC and senior benefits – to name a few. These are happening at the same time as city and community wellness programs are promoting gardening to youth and adults, while teaching cooking and canning classes.

What’s most needed at this time is leadership from policy makers, program administrators, elected officials, and nonprofit organizations to recognize and strongly support these and similar efforts as beacons of hope across the state.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Goal: Increase food security in Oklahoma by making fresh, affordable locally-grown food more available to all Oklahomans.

- Support Healthy Corner Store, Farm to School and farmers market initiatives at local and state levels
- Encouraging more Oklahoma farmers to produce healthy home-grown food for consumption by local residents and institutions
- Increase the affordability of nutritious foods by eliminating the state sales tax on fruits and vegetables

Goal: Link Oklahoma-grown foods with good taste and health. The health of Oklahomans can be improved if Oklahomans increase their consumption of farm-fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean meats.

- Promote gardening, healthy cooking instruction, nutrition education and eating local, in schools, households and communities
- Limit the abundance of unhealthy foods in communities and require nutritional information be provided to fast food customers
- Establish local food policy councils in cities and counties to explore ways to increase production, consumption and overall availability of healthy local foods.

### **To increase food security in your own backyard:**

- [Find](#) and shop at a farmers market to support your local farmers
- Join the [Oklahoma Food Co-op](#)
- Start a small garden and [plant a row for the hungry](#)

## **Sources**

<sup>1</sup> Closer to Home: Healthier Food Farms and Families in Oklahoma, 2006. Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, [http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/closer\\_to\\_home/index.htm](http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/closer_to_home/index.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Household Food Security in the United States, 2008 / ERR-83. Economic Research Service, USDA.

<sup>3</sup> Food Stamp Usage Across the Country, 2009. New York Times interactive map, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/11/28/us/20091128-foodstamps.html>

<sup>4</sup> America’s Health Rankings, Oklahoma, 2012. United Health Foundation, <http://www.americashealthrankings.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Concept of a Nutritious Food: Toward a Nutrient Density Score, 2005. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition 82:721-32.

<sup>6</sup> Food Availability and Food Deserts in the Non-Metropolitan South, 2006. Blanchard, T.C., and Lyson, T.A., [http://srdc.msstate.edu/focusareas/health/fa/fa\\_12\\_blanchard.pdf](http://srdc.msstate.edu/focusareas/health/fa/fa_12_blanchard.pdf)